

New Year's In Scotland

& A. Ireland Robertson



HB stern, Calvinistic Puritanism of Scotland has doubtless to answer for some idiosyncrasies of the people. While it produced heroes and martyrs, men of unwavering probity and dauntless courage whose rigid adherence to their convictions compels respect, it was also responsible for a certain narrowness of vision and for intolerance in some directions. To these less estimable characteristics Scotland owed the doubtful distinction which she enjoyed till within the past few years of being the only Christian country in the world in which the greatest of the Christian festivals was ignored. Ignored it was, absolutely. Christmas observances and Christmas festivities were anathema to the true-blue Scot of a generation ago. Not, be it noted, because he objected to mirth and joviality in themselves. Those who imagine that the old life of Scotland from year's end to year's end was dull, gray and colorless make a profound mistake. The observance of Christmas was ignored because it offended the religious susceptibilities of the Scot.

Even yet non-observance of Christmas must, in truth, be reckoned among the peculiarities of Scotland. A better, kinder and more tolerant spirit exists, but the old feeling is not quite dead. Moreover national customs and the usages of centuries are not to be changed quickly. Christmas observance in Scotland is, at the best, only in its infancy.

It is when Christmas festivities have come to an end, and roast turkey, goose, plum pudding and mince pies are but memories (more or less pleasant), that Scotland enters upon her great annual saturnalia. From time immemorial boisterous, and in many cases bacchanalian revelry has been associated with the close of the old and the opening of the new year. Formerly the period was distinguished by the significant title of "The Daft Days." The name was given more particularly to the season between Hogmanay (the last day of the year) and Haudsday Monday (the first Monday after New Year's day), but, like the generosity which characterized it, the time was not strictly limited.

The name indicates very expressively the mirth, fun and uproarious joviality of the period and the irresponsibility of the revelers. While the Daft Days have now been shorn of some of their glory, much of the spirit remains. And although it is still, as it has been in the past, associated with foolish errors of judgment, it is, on the whole, a spirit to be cherished. For it is a genial spirit, a spirit of good will, of generosity and of hospitality. It is the spirit of Christmas—a trifle belated. The New Year in Scotland sees the union of sundry households. Now is the time when

One of the most common rhymes was the following brief couplet. Sometimes it was tacked on to one or other of those already given:

"Our feet's cap'd, oor shoon's thin,
Gie's a place an' let's rin."
Another version has it:

"Gie's oor cakes, and let's rin."
Still another old greeting is:

"Hogmanay,
Trololaday,
Gie's o' your white bread, an' name o' your gray."

There are many others; the children in some places singing a long ditty.

A Hogmanay custom of a very curious kind is peculiar to certain parts of the highlands. Young and old in the district gather at the house of some substantial farmer, and one of the stoutest of the company drags the dried hide of a cow round the house behind him, three times. The rest follow, beating the hide with sticks and singing the following extraordinary rhyme:

"Hogmanay, yellow bag,
Beat the skin.
Carlin in neuk, carlin in kirk,
Carlin ben at the fire,
Spit in her two eyes, spit in her stomach,
Hogmanay."

This is supposed to have something to do with warding off fairy spells, the evil eye and the effect of witchcraft generally. After completing the third round the company halt at the door and each person proceeds in a rough rhyme, more or less extemporized, to extol the hospitality of the owner of the house, upon which all are regaled with bread and butter, cheese and whisky. But the strange performance has an equally curious sequel. Before leaving the house one of the visitors, having solemnly burned the breast part of the skin of a sheep, puts it to the nose of everyone that he or she may smell it. There is no difficulty in doing so. It may not be nice, but as a protection against witchcraft it is infallible. It is also said to protect from infection.

In Carlisle—yes, I know Carlisle is not in Scotland, but it is so close to the border that I am not traveling very wide of my subject in mentioning a custom there. In Carlisle for weeks before the New Year householders are serenaded by boys who seek to entertain them with an odd mixture of the comic and the religious, generally winding up with a refrain after this fashion:

"If you cannot spare a penny,
You can spare a halfpenny;
And if you haven't a halfpenny,
God bless you."

The poetry halts badly, but the concluding sentiment is excellent.

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Even were she disinclined to be generous such a threat would, of course, compel hospitality. The party is invited to enter:

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Hogmanay was the chief night for the performances of the guisers of gypsies, or gulsards, although they did not confine themselves to that evening, their "season" continuing right through the Daft Days. In places in which guising still goes on the performances, however, are nearly always on the evening of Hogmanay. The guisers are masquers, and their drama bears some resemblance to the old Twelfth Night mumming in England, and, like it, is believed to be a relic of the mystery plays.

The versions found in different parts of the country are not identical, but they bear a certain family resemblance to each other. The dressing was not by rule, but was entirely dependent on the available "wardrobe." Sometimes the boy performers donned shirts which had belonged to their fathers, adorned their heads with paper caps, and had brilliant sashes round their waists in which were hung swords of lath, or metal if they could be obtained. The most simple form of guising was that in which two boys sang while a third, who was dressed as a girl, and known as Bessie, engaged in a number of antics.

But a more ambitious form was that of the Galashans, or Galashans, or Galashans—the name varies. The Galashans wore hideous masks, paper caps, and such odd garments as

they could find. A vast crowd still gathers every year at the Tron Kirk in Edinburgh, waiting till twelve o'clock strikes. A similar gathering is found at the town house or principal church in many other towns. In some places the bells are rung. In Dundee the advent of the new year is announced by the boom of the time gun.

Immediately the clock strikes twelve the crowds melt as by magic. Everybody rushes off to be "first-foot" to some of his friends. Formerly the first-footers carried a spiced bowl of wassail, a mixture composed of hot spiced ale, with a dash of whisky in it, and sometimes sugar and other ingredients. The custom was known in Scotland as the "hot pint." In these days a bottle of whisky is carried.

No "first-foot" must enter a house "empty-handed." Of course the whisky bottle prevents any calamity happening on this score. The personality of the "first-foot," however, counts for much. It is of vital importance to have a lucky "first-foot," and fortunately there are many marks to distinguish the lucky from the unlucky. There are still persons to be found who would as soon admit his Satanic majesty as their first visitor for the year as an unlucky "first-foot." In some places the "first-foot" must be a bachelor, but this is not a common restriction. Among those who are to be reckoned lucky as a "first-foot" are clerymen, persons who spread out their feet, persons who were born first feet, persons noted for kindness, a sweetheart, etc. A horse is a lucky "first-foot." So is a hen. Among those who are unlucky in the role of "first-foot" we find associated persons with flat feet, thieves, persons who walk with their toes turned in, deformed persons, persons whose eyebrows meet, the hangman, the grave digger and (tell it not among members of the Women's Social and Political Union, whisper it not in the ears of members of the Women's League of Freedom) women generally. A pig is an unlucky "first-foot," and so is a hare. Perhaps this may be useful information to some readers.

On New Year's day, and still more frequently on Haudsday Monday, there used to be popular shooting matches or Wapshaws. But difficulties with regard to the gun tax have ruined these.

Haudsday Monday, as I have already mentioned, is the first Monday after New Year's day. It was so called because on this day servants, children and friends were presented with their hauds—a generic term for gifts in money or kind. In the towns Christmas boxes are supplanting hauds. Of course the thing is the same—the only difference being in the name.

At Wemyss, on the Fifeshire shore of the Firth of Forth, a curious New Year game, known as Yettills, has been played since time immemorial. It appears to be peculiar to the locality. The play takes place over a portion of the shore called the Skelleys. The name in

length, and is over the rocks all the way. At each end is a goal marked by a huge boulder. The yettills, which give their name to the game, are balls of cast iron, about two and one-half inches in diameter and weighing about a pound and a half. Each player has a ball, and the object of the game is by repeated throws to cover the distance between the goals. The one who reaches the goal in fewest throws scores a "hall," and a certain number of balls constitute a game. The yettills go at immense speed when it is thrown, and the delivery is pretty high.

Another very remarkable local custom connected with the New Year is the burning of the clavie. It takes place in the little village of Burghhead, on the southern shore of the Moray Firth, a few miles north of Elgin, and is quite unique. The ceremony is held invariably on New Year's eve old style. The clavie, which is built according to regulations rigidly fixed by ancient custom, consists of half an archangel tar barrel supported on a stout pole. It is packed with wood, which is piled up a foot above the brim, after which tar is poured over it copiously. Into a space which has been left in the center a piece of turf is put, it being imperative that no match should be employed. While the flame is gathering strength the crowd gives three cheers for the king, the provost, the town, the harbor and the railway. Then a stalwart fisherman seizes the blazing clavie and carries it off. As soon as he reaches the junction of two streets he is relieved, and in this way the clavie is carried round the town. At every street corner the bearer is changed. There is keen competition for the honor of carrying the clavie, but it is no light task. Not only is it a heavy burden, but the bearer runs some risk of being scalded by the boiling tar which bubbles and drops. Moreover, it is imperative on the bearer to run, in spite of the fact that a stumble implies his own death during the year and misfortune to the town.

Use of Time.

"I saved ten minutes a day at lunch for twenty years."

"What of it?"

"Oh, it was well that I saved all this time, for now I spend two hours daily in the anteroom of a dyspepsia specialist."

Pessimistic.

"Papa, is there such a thing as a reform cooking school?"

"I doubt it, Johnny; if there is, it hasn't any pupils."

A Husband's Rights.

According to a Missouri court, a husband has a perfect right to spank his wife. Sure, and he has a perfect right to pull a lion's whiskers if he feels like it—Los Angeles Examiner.

His Suspicious Arousal.

"John, do you love your little wife?"

"Yes."

"Do you love me very much?"

"Oh, yes."

"Will you always love me?"

"Yes—say, woman, what have you gone and ordered sent home now?"—Pittsburg Post.

Mamma Bookworm.

"Willie, you come right here to get cleaned. I saw you so dirty. You've been eating through the pages of that divorce testimony, haven't you?"—Puck.

At a dinner party the other night, a handsome young physician had been particularly bright and entertaining. As the ladies were leaving the table, cigars were passed around all accepted by all the male guests with the exception of the doctor.

"What—don't you smoke, doctor?" he asked. "Why, my dear man, you lose half your dinner by refusing."

"I know that," replied the abstemious scientist, "but if I did smoke, I'd lose all of it. Please excuse me."—Cleveland Plain Dealer.

So Annoying.

The First Chauffeur: "I ran over another baby this morning."

The Second Chauffeur: "Pshaw! That was unlucky!"

The Third Chauffeur: "Yes, rotten! Their damned feedin' bottles cut the tires up so!"—Sketch.

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